

Testimony of Congressman James McGovern
Before the Budget Committee, March 8, 2001

Thank you for allowing me to testify here today. I am here today to strongly urge this committee to reinstate full funding for the FIRE act and FEMA's Project Impact in the FY 2002 budget. Every year, across this nation, over 100 fire fighters are killed in the line of duty. In 1999, the number of fire fighter deaths was up by over 20%. The time to address the nationwide lack of proper funding for fire personnel and facilities is NOW. Just as important, Project Impact has saved dozens of lives and billions of dollars, by ensuring that communities all across the nation are as resistant to disaster as possible, from earthquakes in California, to Hurricanes in South Carolina, to tragic fires in my home state of Massachusetts.

Despite their proven effectiveness, these two programs were summarily dismissed in President Bush's FY 2002 budget blueprint. Ironically enough, the proposed FEMA cuts were printed in the Budget Blueprint the same day a massive earthquake hit Seattle, Washington-- a city that has benefited greatly from Project Impact. Washington Gov. Gary Locke has said that as a result of Project Impact dollars, earthquake preparedness offered by FEMA had a tremendous amount to do with minimizing damage and injury in the recent quake. Project Impact is more than just money, it brings communities together. As former Director James Lee Witt said recently, "The big thing is that it gets people in the community involved in eliminating the risks themselves."

The FIRE Act is equally important. Last year, 285 members of congress co-sponsored the FIRE Act before it was added to the FY 2001 Department of Defense Appropriations Bill. This tremendous outpouring of bipartisan support for one piece of legislation is proof of the importance of this issue. Fire departments all over this nation, and in each one of our districts, are in dire need of updated equipment, increased safety measures, and heightened training. In December of 1999, my hometown of Worcester lost 6 brave fire fighters in a tragic blaze in an abandoned cold-storage warehouse. The city of Worcester is currently applying for a FIRE Act Grant to build a new fire training facility to better train our fire fighters in dealing with on the job conditions. In an effort to avoid similar tragedies in the future, FEMA Director James Lee Witt visited Worcester and granted the city \$100,000 in Project Impact funding to kick off a pilot program to deal with the problem of abandoned buildings, a problem that is plaguing many of this country's cities and towns. From Boston to Los Angeles, abandoned buildings across America are creating death traps for fire fighters and homeless citizens in urban areas. The Worcester pilot program, funded by Project Impact dollars, will be a national model for the handling of these dangerous structures. In President Bush's budget blueprint, both the Fire Act and Project Impact are dismissed as ineffective, and beyond the scope of the Federal Government. As the Worcester experience shows, nothing could be further from the truth. Tragedies can be prevented, but not if vital FEMA programs such as these are eliminated in the name of a huge tax cut. We must learn from the past, so that we are not condemned to repeat it.

I strongly urge each of you to reconsider this dangerous elimination of vital FEMA funding. Both Project Impact and the FIRE Act are crucial to safety of our

citizens across the nation, and their complete elimination from the budget do nothing but make our communities more dangerous places to live.